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C O N F I D E N T I A L DHAKA 001799

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/18/2010

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PTER BG

SUBJECT: 22 SENTENCED TO DEATH FOR MURDER OF AL MP

Classified By: P/E Counselor D.C. McCullough, reason para 1.4 d.

¶1. (C) Summary: A Speedy Trial Tribunal has sentenced to death 22 people, mostly tied to the ruling BNP, for the May 2004 murder of Awami League MP Ahsanullah Master. AL leaders expressed satisfaction with the judgment but want the "godfathers" behind the attack identified and brought to justice. There are reliable reports that police were prevented from tracing links between Master's killers and senior BNP figures, a pattern many believe is being repeated in the Kibria case. Nevertheless, the BDG can now argue that it has solved the murder of a major opposition leader. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The April 16 sentencing of 22 persons to death for the May 2004 murder of Awami League (AL) MP Ahsanullah Master represents the most capital punishment sentences for a single case in Bangladeshi history. Master, a popular AL labor leader and Chairman of the Institute for Labor Studies, was shot to death, along with a student, during a political rally in the industrial district of Tongi. He was well-known and respected as a teacher and a scholar who worked closely with BNP leaders on labor issues. Master was also active in trying to rid his constituency of drugs and criminals. His murder generated widespread media attention and demands for justice. Master's young son, as the AL candidate, easily won the subsequent by-election for his father's seat.

¶3. (SBU) The trial and sentencing were done in record time. Up to 17 of those sentenced to death appear to be tied to the BNP, while three others are AL activists, and two more belong to General Ershad's Jatiya Party. The alleged mastermind, Nurul Islam Sarkar, is reportedly a local BNP youth wing leader whose brother is the BNP leader from the Tongi area. Six other defendants were sentenced to life imprisonment. However, only 12 of the defendants are actually in custody.

¶4. (SBU) The tribunal judge told local media that local political activists were behind the crime because they viewed Master as an obstacle to their criminal activities in the area. He noted the condemned have the right of appeal to the high court, and that this process would likely be lengthy.

¶5. (SBU) Ahsanullah's family has expressed satisfaction with the verdict and is asking for prompt execution of the condemned. AL Secretary General Abdul Jalil told us that he is generally happy with the convictions but wants the "conspirators" and "godfathers" who directed the attack to be identified and brought to justice as well. AL Joint Secretary General Mukul Bose confirmed to us that the party

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is happy with the convictions, and wants similar speedy justice in the Kibria case.

¶6. (C) Comment: There are reliable reports that police were prevented from tracing links between the suspects and senior BNP figures, a pattern many believe is being repeated with the Kibria case. Nevertheless, the BDG can now argue that it has solved the murder of a major opposition leader. The assertion that criminal interests drove Master's killing is consistent with the common overlap between local political activists of all parties and criminal activities.

THOMAS